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ABSTRACT

Spanish verbs pose contextual problems for the non-native speaker in his use of the subjunctive, reflexives, and pronouns. The semantic range and syntactic contexts of many common verbs are usually treated and learned very unsystematically. One ordinarily seeks answers to contextual questions from a dictionary, but dictionaries do not provide sufficient examples to explain the range of uses or contexts for verbs. The preparation of a contextual dictionary of Spanish verbs is proposed here as a reference work, a teaching guide, and a source of linguistic data. Preliminary research with about 100 verbs indicates that all Spanish verbs can be grouped into about a dozen overlapping classes: intransitive; subjectless; those taking sentence or infinitive subjects; accusative, taking a noun phrase as object; inchoative; dative, with an indirect object; prepositional, taking a preposition before a complement; copulas, which link a subject to a subject complement; auxiliaries; those not used as progressives; those not used in the imperative; and those that cannot take an animate object. The proposed dictionary would provide an alphabetical listing of the verbs with their classes and examples and a listing of classes and subclasses with their member verbs. (CK)

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John B. Dalbor, Pennsylvania State University, "A Tentative Proposal for a Contextual Dictionary of Spanish Verbs," given at MLA, Applied Linguistics section, Dec. 27, 1974.

Every Spanish teacher is only too well aware of the problems English-speaking students have in mastering the contextual properties of even the most common Spanish verbs. For example, even at the intermediate or advanced level, many students produce such sentences as item (1) on the handout: * Quiero a ir.

Students likewise are unsure of which verbs govern the use of the subjunctive in nominal clauses. They are often surprised that parecer normally takes the indicative, as in item (2): Me parece que viene, apparently feeling that the verb parecer somehow suggests doubt or at least uncertainty.

Good teachers and good textbooks, as well, attempt to classify verbs -- at least partially -- for easier learning. For example, they typically present a class of so-called "reflexive verbs," including such items as levantarse 'to stand up' (literally, 'to raise oneself') and bañarse 'to take a bath' (literally, 'to bathe oneself'). This is an incorrect approach in my opinion since classifying such verbs as reflexive seems to obscure the fact that virtually all of them can also be used in an ordinary transitive, non-reflexive way. Students, however, associate them so completely with reflexivity that they

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cannot say why a sentence like 'He raises his hand' is not (3) * Se levanta la mano, rather than the correct (4) Levanta la mano.

Another typical problem are the impersonal se, or se-passive sentences, such as (5) Se baila mucho or (6) Se habla español. There is never a mention that sentences like (7) * Se ladra mucho de noche ^ and (8) * Se comió todo el pasto ^ are ungrammatical in Spanish because these se constructions can only be used with verbs whose actions are performed by human, although unspecified, agents.

'There's a lot of barking at night'

'All the fodder was eaten up [by the horses].'

My very strong suspicion is that the possible normal contexts for even the most common Spanish verbs are simply not known by the average non-native-speaking teacher of the language, let alone the student. I by no means exclude myself from this group. When preparing pedagogical materials for publication a few years ago -- after almost 25 years of studying Spanish and after almost 20 years of teaching it -- I blundered by writing the following drill item: (9) * Interesan a mi hijo. ^ * Le interesan. ^ I can no longer be sure as to whether I overlooked or simply did not know that interesar with this meaning not only takes a dative rather than an accusative, but must also leave a copy of the indirect-object noun in the form of the pronoun le, as in the correct version,

'They interest my son.' 'They interest him.'

item (10) Le interesan a mi hijo. Le interesan.

This rather forcefully brought home the fact that all of us have had to learn not only the semantic range but the syntactic contexts of these common verbs in a non-systematic and very unsatisfactory fashion. To be sure, some of these matters are fairly well treated in the average pedagogical grammar -- such as which verbs govern the indicative and which the subjunctive, which of the so-called auxiliary verbs, like lograr or querer, directly precede a dependent infinitive, and which, like alcanzar a or tener que, require intervening prepositions or particles.

But far too little time is devoted to what we might call the case properties of all verbs, with sentential, infinitive, noun, and pronoun complements. Most non-native speakers of Spanish who seem to know the language quite well are somewhat uncertain when confronted with such questions as how to pronominalize the noun complement in American Spanish in sentence (11) Renunció a su hijo. They vacilate between (12) * Lo renunció, (13) * Le renunció, and what I have found to be the favored (14) Renunció a él. I invite those of you who are non-native speaking teachers and students of Spanish to ask yourselves how sure you are of the contextual properties of convencer in such sentences as 'I convinced

her to go', 'I convinced her that she should go', 'I convinced her of that', 'I convinced her that I was going', and just 'I convinced her', referring to any of the above possibilities.

These questions have long been of great interest to theoretical linguists, whose focus, naturally enough, is on an explanation for the behavior of these verbs. We have seen how transformationalists, generative semanticists, case grammarians, and now thematics grammarians, can construct ingenious theories, develop powerful but tremendously complicated rules, and posit deep structures which to me frankly sometimes border on the outlandish. Of course, no one really expects theoretical linguists to try to provide guidelines for the student as to what Spanish sentences he can safely generate. Yet, somewhere along the line, someone must provide reliable and relatively simple information on these mundane surface structures since it is precisely in the realm of surface structure that Spanish students and teachers must function. Deep structures, unfortunately, seem not so deep that they are able to resist the ebb and flow of the latest linguistic theories, but surface structures remain stubbornly just about the same.

In such Spanish sentences as (15) La criada olvidó la cerilla and (16)

La criada se olvidó de la comida, it is, I suppose, interesting that la criada is really the experiencer rather than the agent in the deep structure and that la comida is semantically accusative in the deep structure for sentence (16) as well as for (15). But of more concern to the student are such questions as, Are both sentences absolutely synonymous?, How does la comida pronominalize in no. (16)?, and Is de absolutely necessary in no. (16)? Also, Can either verb phrase be used before an infinitive complement as well, as in (17) La criada olvidó cerrar la puerta and (18) La criada se olvidó de cerrar la puerta? And can sentence (18) also mean 'The maid forgot she closed the door'?

The obvious place to look first for these answers is the dictionary, but we are rarely satisfied with what we find on such elusive points. Either the information is just not there, or the examples are inconclusive. For example, dictionaries of peninsular Spanish have the annoying habit of providing examples in the third-person masculine form, where the pronoun le serves both as accusative and dative for human objects. All dictionaries seem to provide a great number of examples in the first- or second-person, with me, te, and nos, where is likewise no difference between accusative and dative in any dialect of Spanish.

Returning for a moment to my mistake with interesar (item 9), I found the following information in several standard Spanish-English dictionaries. One said, "Interesar. Active, transitive verb. 'to interest, attract'." Another stated, "Transitive verb. 'to interest', 'be of interest to'," with the following examples: (19) ¿Te interesa el fútbol?, (20) No me interesan los toros, and (21) La propuesta no nos interesa. One all-Spanish dictionary has "verbo transitivo" with (22) Eso no me interesa, and another has "inspirar interés" with (23) Ese artículo no me interesa.

I can at least partially agree with Dorothy Hurst, who concluded that "the dictionary of the Academy has mislabeled this verb; it should be classed as an intransitive verb in the meaning 'inspirar interés o afecto a una persona'." I would classify it as a dative, but more on this point in a moment.

Chomsky in the first major revision of his theory in 1965 proposed that verbs should be represented by complex symbols, expressing both their contextual features -- what he called "strict sub-categorization" -- and also their selectional restrictions, that is, the inherent features of the type of subject and object that verbs can take. These rules, properly specified for each verb, should block sentences like * 'They elapsed the boy' or * 'The boy may frighten

sincerity.'

It appears that these latter selectional restrictions are rarely the source of student errors in learning Spanish. I can't recall ever having a student produce such a sentence as (24) * El muchacho puede asustar a la sinceridad, and I assume that it is because no student of Spanish would ever try to say such a thing in English. Yet the former restrictions -- the syntactic contextual features -- are a serious and constant source of errors in learning the new language.

I propose then a contextual dictionary of Spanish verbs, not only as a reference work for students of the Spanish language but also a guide for teachers, a source of examples for the applied linguist and of data for the theoretical linguist. One must first recognize the limited but important efforts that have already been made along these lines. Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin in 1965 suggested a brief classification system for some common Spanish verbs. Moliner's Diccionario de uso del español has a wealth of raw data but makes no attempt to organize the type of information I have been discussing. Hadlich in his Transformational Grammar of Spanish is also concerned with verb types. Maurice Gross in 1968 proposed a transformationally-oriented

classification system for French verbs, and Anna McCoy in 1969 proposed a case grammar classification of Spanish verbs, but both works are primarily theoretical and not the type of lexical tool I propose here.

To carry out such a task for Spanish is indeed imposing but is actually a reasonably finite undertaking. Just a quick perusal of a standard Spanish-English paperback dictionary enabled me to come up with about 1300 Spanish verbs which my experience suggests might be encountered passively or used actively by an advanced student. Nowhere near half of them are really "interesting" in a linguistic sense, however. And most of them, in my opinion, would readily fall into a few large and standard groups. Based on my preliminary research with about a hundred verbs, I feel that all Spanish verbs fall into about a dozen tentative classes, which are to some extent overlapping.

The first are INTRANSITIVES, represented by the frame in item (25), ___ #, that is, verbs that do not normally take an object of any kind, such as aparecer, marchar, and trabajar.

The second can be called SUBJECTLESS since the subject is non-recoverable. Some of these, represented by (26), # ___ #, are intransitive, such as llover and nevar, and others, represented by (27), # ___ NP, may precede a noun phrase, such as hacer with elapsed time constructions or weather expressions, and haber, meaning 'there to be'.

The third class take SENTENCE or INFINITIVE SUBJECTS, such as ocurrir or resultar, and is represented in part by (28). This class also includes some verbs which take a dative, as in (29), such as gustar, as in (30) Me gusta ese vestido or (31) Me gusta venir temprano.

The fourth class are ACCUSATIVE, that is, verbs that take a noun phrase directly. I hesitate to use the term "transitive" since I have never been able to find a satisfactory definition for this term -- at least as far as Spanish is concerned. One sub-class contains those verbs which take a noun phrase that cannot be deleted, as shown by (32). Such verbs are levantar, poner, and quitar. Another sub-class contains verbs whose following noun phrase can be deleted, as shown in (33). Such verbs are comer, hablar, querer, and subir.

The fifth class, INCHOATIVE, is one of the most elusive, challenging, and therefore widely investigated verb types in Spanish. Most can be both active and inchoative, as shown in (34), and include such verbs as alegrar and cansar. When used with an object that is not co-referential, the subject is viewed as an agent actively operating on the object, as in (35) Yo la canso con mis problemas. But when the object is co-referential and, thus, reflexive, the subject is an experiencer rather than an agent, and the action of the verb

come from outside the subject, as in (36) Yo no como (de esas cosas), meaning, of course, that those things make me tired. As Roldán has pointed out, an appropriate question for (35) is (37) ¿Qué haces?, whereas a more appropriate question for (36) is (38) ¿Qué te pasa?

The sixth class are DATIVE, that is, verbs that occur with a real dative indirect object. The so-called dative of interest or benefactive must be excluded from consideration here since virtually any verb in Spanish can be used this way, as in (39) Este niño no me come, or (40) Esa máquina no le funciona bien. Some sort of real or at least psychological transfer must take place in the type of dative I mean, as in (41) El hombre le dio un peso al niño. As yet, I have not discovered a completely formal way of distinguishing such true datives from benefactives in Spanish.

Many dative verbs occur with a deletable indirect object, shown by (42) ____ (IO), such as interesar and pasar. Some are obligatorily reflexive, such as antojarse and ocurrirse.

The seventh class are what I call PREPOSITIONAL since the verb can or must take a characteristic preposition before a following complement, represented by ____ (prep NP) (43), and includes such verbs as constar de and contar con. A sub-class shows

___ [Prep Inf.]

the presence of an obligatory preposition plus infinitive, represented by (44) ^ and includes such verbs as acabar de, llegar a , and tener que. One must be careful to determine that the preposition is really characteristic of the verb rather than a constituent of the following phrase. Thus we can distinguish between the prepositional phrases in such sentences as (45) Una baraja consta de cincuenta y dos cartas and (46) Cuento con ella, where the verb is a prepositional, and the prepositional phrases ^ in such sentences as (47) Viene de su casa and (48) Trabajo con ella, where the prepositions are generated independently of the verb as part of the following locative or accompaniment phrase. In both sentences (45) and (46), the prepositions are not only characteristic of the verb but must obligatorily precede a complement in order for the verb to have the intended meaning.

The eighth class are COPULAS, which link the subject to a subject complement of some sort, which must either be expressed, or , if deleted, can readily be supplied by the listener. For example, in the frame shown in (49) ___ $\left\{\begin{matrix}\text{Adj.}\\ \text{NP}\end{matrix}\right\}$ [+ lo] ^ both ser and parecer normally require subject complements, either in primary form, as in (50) La mujer era española, or in pronominalized form with the invariable lo, as in (51) Pero no lo parecía.

The ninth class, AUXILIARIES, are verbs used in verbal periphrasis or in

what Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin call "secondary modifications" of the verb.

The frame in (52) ___ past part. [- gender] is usually filled by haber to form the perfect tenses.

The tenth class, with the frame marked as in (53) ___ [- prog.], includes the relatively few verbs in Spanish which are not used in the progressive tense. This class is smaller than in English, as we see with such sentences as (54) ¿Sabe usted lo que me está pareciendo? * 'Do you know what it is seeming to me?' or (55) Estamos queriendo saber. * 'We are wanting to know.'

Class eleven, with the frame marked as in (56) ___ [- imp.], includes verbs which are not used in the imperative. This class is also more limited in Spanish than one might expect from English, as we see by such sentences as (57) ¡Conozca México! ? 'Know Mexico!' and (58) ¡Sepa usted bien que no soy lo que usted cree! * 'Know full well that I am not what you think!' I am not yet aware of any verbs which might by [- imp.] in Spanish but not English.

Class twelve, with the frame marked as in (59) ___ [se-passive], includes the few verbs in Spanish that cannot take a [+ animate, - human], or animal, subject, blocking such sentences as (60) * Se ladra mucho de noche. 'There's a lot of barking at night.' This is a way of getting at the problem of selectional restrictions, which, as I have said, seems to be a minor one for English-speakers learning Spanish.

Obviously, most of these broad classes have a multitude of sub-classes, and most verbs I have worked with fit into more than one main class as well as

several sub-classes within the same main class. It is interesting to me that many verbs change meaning according to their broad contextual class. For example, one interesar is in the dative class, as in (61) Le interesa la música. 'Music interests her.' Another interesar is in the accusative class, as in (62) Interesó una cantidad en la lotería. 'He invested quite a bit in the lottery.'

Also some verbs even change their meaning according to their sub-class within a single main class. For example, decir could be divided into $decir_1$ ___ (IO) S' to fill the frame in (63), showing its basically communicative property, as in 'They told him they're not coming.' a sentence like (64) Le dijeron que no vienen. But $decir_2$ ___ (IO) S' [+ subj.] , with a discernible change in meaning, occurs in the frame in (65), showing its suasive or manding properties, as in a sentence like (66) Le dijeron que no viniera. 'They told him not to come.'

To be sure, however, many verbs retain their basic meaning, even when used in different syntactic contexts. For example, $esperar_1$ 'to wait' is accusative in (67) Esperamos al tren 'We're waiting for the train.' (68) or just Esperamos. 'We're waiting.' Yet $esperar_1$ also occurs as a prepositional with the same meaning in a sentence like (69) Esperen ustedes a que venga su papá: 'Wait until your dad comes!'

The converse of this is also true. Some common verbs in exactly the same syntactic class have quite different meanings, despite their identical contextual

properties. For example, pasar$_1$ 'to pass', occurs before a noun phrase in (70)
'He passed the course.'
Pasó el curso, and pasar$_2$, also 'to pass', occurs before a noun phrase in (71)
'He passed the counterfeit bill.'
Pasó el billete falso. In this case, of course, the conventional dictionary way of resorting to definitions, translation, and examples would have to be used to sort out these various meanings of pasar within this single accusative class.

Nevertheless, it is my contention that a purely syntactic classification of Spanish verbs would in itself go a long way toward showing the basic semantic distinctions that conventional dictionaries and grammars are unable to show solely through definitions and translations.

Let us look at what one partial entry might be like, shown in (72):

interesar$_1$ 'to interest' (Class VI, DATIVE) ^ ___ (IO) La idea no me interesó 'The idea didn't interest me'; La idea no interesó 'The idea was of no interest'. (Also Class III, SENTENCE or INFINITIVE AS SUBJECT) ^ $\begin{Bmatrix} S' \text{ [+ subj.]} \\ \text{inf.} \end{Bmatrix}$ ___ IO Me interesa que lo hagas 'I'm interested in your doing it'; Me interesa hacerlo 'I'm interested in doing it'.

interesar$_2$ = interesarse en 'to be (get) interested in' (Class V, INCHOATIVE)

___ NP [+ refl.] prep $\left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{NP}\\ \text{inf.}\\ \text{S' [+ subj.]}\end{array}\right\}$ Me intereso en el fútbol 'I'm interested in soccer'; Me intereso en comprarlo 'I'm interested in buying it'; Me intereso en que vengas 'I'm interested in your coming'.

interesar$_3$ 'to invest' (Class IV, ACCUSATIVE) ___ NP Interesó una cantidad en la lotería 'He invested quite a bit in the lottery'.

After an alphabetical listing of all verbs in the corpus, with their frames and examples, another valuable section of such a dictionary would be a listing of classes and sub-classes with all member verbs simply included without definitions or examples, but with characteristic prepositions and perhaps other brief but crucial information. This latter section would be of greatest value to the theoretical linguist as a source of surface data for the development of theories and to the applied linguist as a source of examples for the elaboration of pedagogical materials. As already mentioned, the student presumably would be most concerned with the syntactic contexts and corresponding meanings given with the conventionally arranged verb entries.

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